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# Review of "Saving State U: Why We Must Fix Public Higher Education"

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Nancy Folbre, Saving State U: Why We Must Fix Public Higher Education. New York: The New Press, 2010. 193 pp.

Nancy Folbre, chair of the Department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has written a very interesting and informative, yet somehow annoying book on why the business model for public higher education is broken and why it must be fixed. Folbre provides a careful and compelling analysis of America's need for better funding higher education. Unfortunately, her excessively casual and irritatingly personal writing style detracts from her study.

Folbre's book is part of a growing concern with the state of higher education in America. As a reflection of this concern, academic leaders recently met at a Princeton University Policy Research Institute forum to discuss "How to Fix a Broken System: Funding Public Higher Education and Making It More Productive." Joining the jeremiad are university presidents like Gordon Gee of The Ohio State University and Richard C. Levin of Yale University, both of whom call for higher education to refocus its strength in the wake of the current economic disaster (see "College Leaders Debate the Value of Higher Education's Business Model," The Chronicle of Higher Education, 28 April 2010). Folbre's careful analysis of the economics of public higher education differs from these discussions in two important ways. First, she provides an in-depth economic perspective on the financial crisis facing public colleges and universities, and second, she addresses her book to the general public rather than to other academics and policy leaders. Folbre's purpose is to explain why America needs public higher education and how it should and could be funded. She contends that we need not just to save higher education, but that we also need to expand and improve it (p.144). She forcefully argues that the "Great Recession" of 2008-09 crippled both private and public colleges and universities but that the seeds of the financial crisis in higher education had begun decades before. Her analysis explains why higher education is essential to economic and social progress, the benefits of low cost and accessible public education, and how narrow and short term economic interests work against the current model of public funding for higher education. In the end, she maintains, if America continues to reduce its investment in public higher education, we will lower the value of our human capital, widen the gap between the social and economic classes, and jeopardize the future well-being of our society.

One of the strengths of Folbre's book is her examination of tax structures and their relationship to funding higher education. Beginning with the "Tax Revolt" of the 1970s, she traces how state governments were squeezed between the anti-tax sentiment of citizens and the Federal government's shifting of costs for a variety of programs to the states. As a result of these difficulties, financial support for public higher education suffered. Folbre insightfully argues that the effort to reduce federal income tax rates by wealthy Americans, the legal evasion of corporate taxes by employers, and the revolt against property and state taxes by homeowners all contributed to the breakdown of government's ability to adequately fund higher education. Folbre's crisp analysis makes a compelling argument that the financial burdens on state governments quickly eroded the political will to support universities and colleges.



Another strength of Saving State U is Folbre's analysis of the "Business Model." Reacting to the persistent call for higher education to operate more efficiently like businesses, Folbre carefully proceeds to dismantle the assumption that education should emulate industry. Using analogies and real life examples, Folbre shows how "cutting costs and increasing revenues" lead to lower graduation rates, a higher proportion of courses taught by adjunct faculty, and, ironically, less innovation. The problem, she passionately and persuasively argues, is that the premises of business and education are different. Business is to maximize profit while education is to enhance human capabilities. The ultimate consequence of applying a business model to a university, Folbre contends, is the weakening of the core values and mission, which in turn undermines the entire social compact.

Despite Folbre's valuable and persuasive economic analysis of public higher education, her excessively informal writing style detracts from the content. While it is clear that she is writing to the general public, Folbre seems to try too hard to be clever. For example, she excessively uses slang and colloquialisms in an attempt to reach the popular audience, and after describing a particularly difficult fiscal situation, Folbre responds with a one word analysis: "Ick!" (p.137). Cute, but not very thoughtful. At other times, her efforts to be humorous and relevant detract the reader from the valid points she is trying to make. For example, in regard to raising additional revenue, she refers to her husband's suggestion that the University's sports arena be used for extreme gladiatorial sports where administrators would battle faculty with wooden swords and catapults (p. 133).

Perhaps humorous, but again, not particularly insightful. Overall, this style undermines the important message of the book by making it too personal, too cute, and too trendy. Writing a book that makes the economics of higher education comprehensible is difficult. Writing a book on this complex subject for the general public that is understandable is nearly Herculean. Folbre has done an outstanding job in analyzing the economics of public higher education and she has succeeded in making that analysis understandable. Setting aside the annoying writing style, Folbre provides an interesting analysis of the political economy of public higher education.

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